

Staffing Your Medical Office to Build a Thriving Practice

Staffing for medical offices requires some unique considerations due to the industry's unique business challenges. We work with a number of medical practices, because too often the physician owners, whose primary mission is quality patient care, lose sight of the need to treat their practice as a business. As with most entrepreneurial operations, doctors tend to want to focus on what they are really good at, which is healing patients. That means that running the office, the actual business of running the medical practice, has to fall to staff members they can trust.

So when hiring professionals to run your medical practice you should have specific criteria in mind to make sure your operation will run smoothly. There are specific traits that we have identified that are critical to the smooth running of a medical office. This is what we have learned from working with our clients:

1. You Need a Good Office Manager

You need a good office manager, practice manager, or, if you have a larger practice, an office administrator. As a physician, you don't want to have to worry about managing day-to-day operations so you need a strong right-hand manager. You want someone self-motivated and responsible because the last thing you want to do is take time away from your patients to manage your office manager.

2. Hire Positive, Friendly People

When hiring the staff members who interact with the public, either in the clinic, the lab, or at the front desk, you need positive, friendly people who understand that patients are really customers. We all have a choice when it comes to where we seek our medical treatment. These days, smaller private practices have to compete with the larger HMOs, and one of the biggest distinguishing factors is customer service. If you can treat the patients as individuals, providing personal, professional, kind, and courteous service, then you are more likely to keep your patients, and to get referrals. If you like, compare this to the bad service in a restaurant. No matter how good the food is, if the service is bad you don't go back, and you don't tell your friends.

3. Establish a Good Rapport with your Partners

The same is true for partners and referrals. If your medical practice is disorganized or discourteous, you can lose referrals from other medical practices. You need to establish a good working rapport with your service partners, such as labs and specialists, so they will show your patients the best of care, and send more patients your way as well.

4. Schedulers are the key to profitability

In the current economic climate the only way to make money is to provide quality care quickly and efficiently. If you can only spend 10 or 15 minutes with each patient to break even, then you need to have a lot of information at hand before you even see the patient. That's the scheduler's job; to make sure patients are on time, their information is up to date, and the schedule is full. Make sure you hire friendly, detail-oriented people who understand how to make your job as physician easier.

5. The billing department also has to be first rate

Unlike other businesses, doctors' billings have unique characteristics that require an additional attention to detail. We have seen cases where doctors are losing thousands to uncollected copayments and sloppy insurance claims. Your billing staff needs to be able to collect money from patients at the appropriate time, understand how to pursue denied claims, and collect from both patients and insurers without leaving any money behind.

Whether you choose to outsource billing or keep it in-house, the billing department also needs to be prepared to provide intelligence into the financial performance of the practice, and their performance in terms of collections. They should be able to provide metrics that are reported monthly, or even weekly, such as:

- What is the practice's average "days in aging," i.e., how long does it take to collect from insurance companies on claims?
- Are patient balances being collected at the time of service?
- How much money is being written off each month and why? Is it from improperly submitted claims? Outdated insurance contracts? Some other problem?
- Are the billers using the proper codes for insurance claims for the best possible reimbursements?

As a physician, if you can assemble the right team of professionals who understand your business and understand how to run the office smoothly, then you can worry about the patients and let the practice run with only minor supervision.